DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 389 367 JC 960 012

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TITLE Using Feature Films To Promote Active Learning in the College Classroom.
PUB DATE Mar 95
NOTE 13p.; In: Teaching of Psychology: Ideas and Innovations. Proceedings of the Annual Conference on Undergraduate Teaching of Psychology (9th, Ellenville, NY, March 22-24, 1995); see JC 960 009.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Active Learning; Audiovisual Aids; *Classroom Techniques; College Instruction; *Curriculum Development; Educational Media; *Films; Higher Education; *Learning Activities; Learning Modalities; Multimedia Instruction; *Psychology; Teaching Methods; Undergraduate Study; Visual Learning

ABSTRACT

Using feature films to teach undergraduate psychology courses can promote active learning for several reasons. Films can reach students with a variety of learning styles, including those with a visual approach to learning. Also, students seem to enjoy commercial films and their use can help decrease levels of monotony from daily lectures. Feature films also provide a context that relates psychological concepts and theories to students' real life experience and illustrate different viewpoints in a situation which may expose students to diverse perspectives and experiences. Feature films can be incorporated into the classroom by designing a course solely around the use of film, showing clips or segments of movies to supplement lectures and discussion, or showing one or two films during the term. Activities that can be used with films include having students write a diary of experiences similar to those seen in personally or socially relevant films, or teaching research methodology by asking students to identify and operationalize constructs evident in the films. Films may be selected from film guide books; computerized services; and/or suggestions from peers, students, and colleagues. Instructors should view films before using them for violent language and content and be aware of copyright laws. A list of 177 films related to mental health, child development, adolescent development, adult development, aging, disability issues, substance abuse, social psychology, racial/ethnic issues, education, gay/lesbian issues, and Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) is appended. (TGI)

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Using Feature Films to Promote Active Learning in the College Classroom

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Presented at the 9th Annual Conference on Undergraduate Teaching of Psychology: Ideas and Innovations, Ellenville, NY. March 1995.

TC 9000 012 TM1

Using Feature Films to Promote Active Learning in the College Classroom

Reasons for using commercial films

Using feature films in the classroom to teach psychology can promote active learning for several reasons. First, students can have a variety of learning styles. Some learn well using a textbook, while others prefer to hear an instructor verbalize material. Others, however, possess a more visual approach to learning. Using feature films may help these students better understand psychological concepts taught in class.

A second reason why commercial films are beneficial in the classroom is because students find them to be very enjoyable. Students can easily lose interest when lectures are given everyday, with classes eventually becoming monotonous. Using feature films can help to decrease these levels of monotony and stimulate interest. At times, these films can be more enjoyable than educational films that tend to present information in a documentary format.

Feature films are also beneficial because they place psychological concepts and theories into a context that relates to students' real life experiences. While feature films may at times be overly dramatized and unrealistic, material can be presented in a context that pertains to everyday life. Often, when students are provided with numerous theories and concepts, information becomes vague and abstract. When the same information is placed into the life of a character in a film and explored in class, it becomes more understandable and relevant to the students.

Feature films also frequently provide different viewpoints on a situation. Students who have not been previously exposed to diverse perspectives or who are limited in

experience might benefit from these examples. For instance, a common stereotype is that depression is an attempt to gain attention from others or feel sorry for oneself. Those accepting this view might better understand depression by viewing a movie that shows a character encountering this stereotype. Factors related to depression, such as feelings of hopelessness and cognitive distortions, may empathetically draw students into a character, perhaps dispelling some of the common stereotypes of psychological disorders. This same principle also applies to stereotypes and discrimination. For those students who have not directly encountered discrimination, a feature film might help them to understand the experiences of those who have.

Feature films also exemplify certain topic areas in psychology. While any one film is unlikely to cover all areas in a psychology course, films can often be found that illustrate certain topic areas. For example, many films portray psychological disorders such as multiple personality disorder, social phenomena such as stereotypes and aggression, or developmental periods of life such as adolescence. Feature films can also be used to discuss the reciprocal relationship between films and real life. For example, the film Malcolm X was seen to have a large impact on society. Clothing with the "X" on it was commonly seen. Students could discuss how this movie influenced people's ethnic identity, self-esteem and self-concept.

How to incorporate films

Films can be incorporated into the classroom in a number of ways. The extent to which films can be used in the classroom falls along a continuum. The most extreme way of incorporating a film into the classroom is by designing a course solely around the use of films. With this method, weekly movies could be shown, with discussion or recitation sessions used to explore psychological issues seen in the film. Certain concepts or

theories that are relevant and seen in the film could be discussed. This method is probably more suited for courses that are more advanced, such as the Psychology of Women or a class on Psychological Disorders. It may be more difficult in an Introductory Psychology course due to the diversity and extent of material that is covered in this type of course.

Another way that films could be incorporated into the classroom is by showing clips or segments of movies. These clips can be interspersed with lectures and discussions. In this way, instructors can help to supplement lecture material and introduce variety into the classroom setting. A disadvantage of this method is that it can be very time consuming to view a movie and decide which clips to use in class.

Finally, an instructor can show one or two films during the semester or quarter. The instructor could show the film during class, assign it as homework, or schedule a time that the movie would be shown outside of class. A benefit to showing a whole movie is that one can see the totality of the idea or issue that is being addressed. Also, showing clips often takes a scene out of context which may be undesirable. Thus, viewing an entire movie can sometimes be beneficial.

Activities to be used in conjunction with films

There are numerous activities that can be used when incorporating films into the classroom to teach Psychology. Students can be instructed to watch a film that is personally or socially relevant and then write a diary of their own experiences similar to those seen in the film. For example, a movie that focuses on discrimination and stereotypes could be watched, with students then writing about their experiences or the experiences of others confronted with discrimination. Students can also be taught research methodology with the use of films. For example, students can be instructed to

identify and operationalize a construct such as gender roles. While watching a film, they can record gender related behaviors. Comparisons with other students' observations may be made and discussions on the differences, or "researcher bias," may follow. Students can also watch a movie and write a case study on one of the characters. They could, for example, use the DSM and identify certain behaviors of a character that are symptomatic of a psychological disorder. A more flexible and activity is to hold discussions after watching a film or a film clip. The instructor could prepare discussion questions and provide them to students prior to viewing the film or the questions could be used directly by the instructor. An additional activity is to make comparisons between a film and other forms of media such as magazines, books or newspapers. Students could explore the relationships between the portrayals and identify those that are most realistic.

How to select films

There are numerous sources that can help in identifying films to use in the classroom. One option is to solicit suggestions from peers, students or colleagues. These sources can be used to identify movies that are more obscure, but provide a good example of psychological concepts. In addition, the advice of others can be helpful in narrowing down the large field of movies that exist to a more reasonable number that instructors can review. There are also film guide books that can be found in bookstores and some movie rental stores. Descriptions of films and ratings are often provided in these guides. There are also computerized services that can be helpful in finding movies. These services can be used to search for movies by categories, actors or directors.

When using films in the classroom to teach psychology it is suggested that the instructor view the film before hand. Instructors should be aware of violence of language so that they and their students are prepared. In addition, instructors should be aware that

copyright laws exist when using films for instructional purposes. It is advised that instructors consult their institutions for policies and laws.

Films Useful for Teaching Psychology

Mental Health:
Awakenings (1990)
The Bell Jar (1979)
David and Lisa (1962)
Equus (1977)
Fatal Attraction (1987)
The Fisher King (1991)
Freud (1962)
Helter Skelter (1976)
I Never Promised You a Rose Garden (1988)
Mr. Jones (1993)
Nell (1994)
Nuts (1987)
One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (1975)
Ordinary People (1980)
The Prince of Tides (1991)
Psycho (1960)
Rain Man (1988)
Raising Cain (1992)
Silence of the Lambs (1991)
The Snake Pit (1948)
Sybil (1976)
Three Faces of Eve (1957)
What About Bob? (1991)

Child Development:
Au Revoir Les Enfants (1987)
Little Man Tate (1991)
My Girl (1991)
My Girl 2 (1994)
My Life as A Dog (1985)
The Sandlot (1993)
Searching for Bobby Fischer (1993)
The Secret Garden (1988)

Adolescent Development:
Alice's Restaurant (1969)
A Little Romance (1979)
All the Right Moves (1983)
American Graffiti (1973)
Anne of Green Gables (1987)
Another Country (1984)
A Separate Peace (1972)
A Sure Thing (1985)
Birdy (1985)
Blackboard Jungle (1955)
Bloodbrothers (1978)
Blue Denim (1959)
Boyz in the Hood (1993)
Breakfast Club (1985)
Breaking Away (1979)
Brighton Beach Memoirs (1986)
Carrie (1976)
Catch-22 (1970)
The Chocolate War
Class (1983)
Dead Poet's Society (1989)
The Diary of Anne Frank (1959)
Diner (1982)
East of Eden (1954)
Endless Love (1981)
Fame (1980)
Fast Times at Ridgemont High (1982)
Ferris Bueller's Day Off (1986)
Flirting (1991)
For Keeps (1988)
The 400 Blows (1959)
Gregory's Girl (1982)
Heathers (1988)
Just Another Girl on the IRT (1993)
Little Darlings (1980)
Little Women (1994)
Lord of the Flies (1990)
Lords of Discipline (1983)
Menace II Society (1993)
My Bodyguard (1980)
My Own Private Idaho (1991)
Mystic Pizza (1988)
The Outsiders (1983)
Pretty in Pink (1986)
Puberty Blues (1981)
Rebel Without a Cause (1955)
Romeo and Juliet (1968)
Rumble Fish (1983)
Running Brave (1983)
Running on Empty (1988)
Say Anything (1989)
School Ties (1993)
Sixteen Candles (1984)
Smooth Talk (1986)
Splendor in the Grass (1961)
Stand and Deliver (1988)
Stand By Me (1986)
Summer of '42 (1961)
Tex (1982)
West Side Story (1961)
Wish You Were Here (1987)

Adult Development:
The Big Chill (1983)
Dad (1989)
The Four Seasons (1981)
Four Weddings and a Funeral (1994)
Fried Green Tomatoes (1991)
The Graduate (1967)
I Never Sang for my Father (1970)
Joyce at 34: When Parents Grow Old
Kramer vs Kramer (1979)
Parenthood (1989)
Reality Bites (1994)
She's Having a Baby (1988)
Steel Magnolias
Terms of Endearment (1983)
35 Up
Wrestling Ernest Hemingway

Aging:
The Cemetery Club (1993)
Cocoon (1985)
Dad (1989)
Driving Miss Daisy (1989)
Harold and Maude (1971)
Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter
On Golden Pond (1981)
Wild Strawberries (1957)

Disability Issues:
Bill: On His Own (1983)
Born on the Fourth of July (1989)
Children of a Lesser God (1986)
Flowers for Algernon
Forrest Gump (1994)
Mask (1985)
My Left Foot (1989)
Regarding Henry (1991)
What's Eating Gilbert Grape? (1993)

Substance Abuse Issues:
Clean and Sober (1988)
I'm Dancing as Fast as I Can (1982)
The Lost Weekend (1948)
One Man's Seduction (1983)
The Rose (1979)
When a Man Loves a Woman (1994)

Social Psychology:
Caine Mutiny (1954)
Clockwork Orange (1971)
Lord of the Flies (1990)
River's Edge (1987)

Racial/Ethnic Issues:
American Me (1992)
Black Like Me (1964)
Boyz in the Hood (1993)
Dim Sum (1985)
Eat a Bowl of Tea (1989)
El Norte (1984)
Farewell My Concubine (1993)
Guess Who's Coming to Dinner (1967)
Joy Luck Club (1993)
Jungle Fever (1964)
The Color Purple (1985)
I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (1979)
A Raisin in the Sun (1961)
Malcom X (1992)
Mandela (1987)
Mississippi Burning (1988)
Mississippi Masala (1990)
Roots
Schindler's List (1993)
School Daze
She's Gotta Have It (1986)
Six Degrees of Separation (1967)
Slaying the Dragon
Stolen Ground
Tampopo (1987)
Thunderheart (1992)
The Wedding Banquet

Education:
Another Country (1984)
Blackboard Jungle (1955)
Dead Poet's Society (1989)
Educating Rita (1983)
Fame (1980)
School Ties (1993)
Stand and Deliver (1988)
To Sir with Love (1967)

Gay/Lesbian Issues:
Longtime Companion (1990)
Maurice (1987)
Serving in Silence
The Times of Harvey Milk
Torch Song Trilogy (1988)

AIDS:
And the Band Played On
Philadelphia (1993)

Advantages of Using Films

- accessible to students with different learning styles
- stimulation of student interest and enjoyment
- exploration of the relationship between films and reality
- demonstration of different viewpoints or perspectives
- exemplification of topic areas in psychology

How to Include Films

- design a film-based course
- show an occasional movie
- show segments of movies to supplement lecture topics

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How to Select Films

- suggestions of students and colleagues
- film guide books
- film reviews in newspapers/ magazines
- computer software packages
- on-line information services

Sample Activities

- preparation of character "case study"
- preparation of a diary that explores issues similar to those in the movie
- method for developing observational research skills and defining constructs
- use of in-class discussions
- comparison of media portrayals (e.g., television, magazines, newspaper, literature)
- comparison of films presenting different perspectives